

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 16th, 2009.

Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

There are two big changes at **Mines Road**. The **Canyon Wren** is no longer there. There are probably still a few at Del Puerto Canyon Road. **Rufous-crowned Sparrow** used to be rare, now they are pretty common.

Joe brought the latest issue of **North American Birds** to class. It is a journal published by ABA that comes out quarterly and summarizes the noteworthy sight records around the whole country. It is an important service. A disadvantage is that it does not have an index. This kind of information should be on the internet, indexed and searchable. There are plans to scan all back issues and put them on the internet.

Articles from this journal:

First NA record of **Tristram's Storm-Petrel**. Was trapped on the Farallon Islands, April 22nd 2006. They had mist nets set up at night to trap Ashy and Leach's Storm-Petrels which are breeding there and this huge bird flies into the net. They assumed it was the only large dark Storm-Petrel that occurs in northern CA, the Black Storm-Petrel. But the photos and the measurements eventually confirmed Tristram's Storm-Petrel, which breeds off Japan. The body is brown and the head is gray. We know very little about these storm-petrels and the bird crashing into a mist net suggests that it might have been prospecting for a nesting location. Now there is another report of one seen at sea off CA.

First US record of **Crowned Slaty-flycatcher** from Louisiana, June 3rd 2008. A southern South American bird that is an austral migrant and can overshoot its migration route. Documented with a specimen. This means it was shot before anybody got a chance to see it. Appropriate permits are fairly easy to get in Louisiana. Louisiana and Alaska are the last two US states where rarities are routinely collected.

In CA if you want to get a **collecting permit** you have to put in an application that says which species you plan to collect and how many and what the research purpose is. You can't get a general permit. Some people have older general permits, these are generally issued to museum curators. There is a loophole, you can collect birds under somebody else's permit.

Years ago there used to be a **Great Horned Owl** nest by the bison paddock in GG Park, until they trimmed the Monterey Pine it was in. Angie recently observed a pair at the bison paddock.

Difference between **geese and ducks**:

Geese have shorter, stubbier bills. They tend to be more terrestrial and forage mostly by grazing in stubble and just sort of shear the grass off, so they will keep your lawn mowed. Tend to be on average a little larger than ducks.

Emperor Goose

OCURRENCE

Breeds in the Bering Sea, winters on the Aleutian Islands.

It does occur occasionally along the west coast further south all the way to southern CA and some years seem to be invasion years. These invasions probably never amount to more than a dozen birds, but that is still a lot of Emperor Geese for a place like CA. We have not had very many Emperor Geese in recent years. When they do occur these birds are often relatively tame and can be closely approached. They are a sea goose, spending most of their time along the immediate coast. They forage apparently mostly on eel grass, which grows in tidal mudflats.

Occasionally they show up in the interior, sometimes associating with large flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese. Klamath Basin and Tule Lake Basin in northeastern CA.

They have shown up in the Bay Area from time to time.

There was a wildlife management program to improve Emperor Goose productivity using cross fostering: they put Emperor Goose eggs in Greater White-fronted Goose nests. The young imprinted on Greater White-fronted Goose and that probably resulted in hybrids later.

FIELD MARKS

A relatively small goose.

Grayish body with lots of scaling on the upperparts and also on the entire underparts.

White head and hindneck.

Bill pink on upper mandible, black on lower.

Black throat and foreneck.

Legs orange, short and stubby.

Tail all white, tail coverts dark, different tail pattern from most of the other geese.

Dark morph Ross's Goose at a distance in a large flock of geese can be mistaken for an Emperor Goose when you just basically see the head and part of the body.

JUVENILE

All dark bird, dark head.

By the time the birds get to CA they usually have an all white head, sometimes with a little bit of dark smudging.

VOCALIZATIONS

Generally very quiet.

Barnacle Goose

OCCURRENCE

Breeds in Greenland, migrates to northern Europe.

A number of sightings on the eastern seaboard, it appears that many of them are probably escapes, they are frequently kept in waterfowl collections and when they escape they can act pretty wild.

There are a number of sightings and there are also some specimen of Barnacle Goose from CA.

Natural occurrence has been questioned for all of these birds.

Strictly a coastal bird in Europe. Does occur in inland fields adjacent to coasts

All CA sightings have been in the Central Valley well away from the immediate coast, this is one of the reasons the records committee has been less than enthusiastic about them.

FIELD MARKS

Mostly white face.

Black neck that extends down the chest.

Very strongly barred back.

PROBABLE HYBRID WITH CANADA OR CACKLING GOOSE

A bird that was associating with Canada Geese on the Alameda golf course.

Small goose with a white chin strap but more extensive than on Canada Goose and also with a little white on the forehead which is an unusual but casual condition in Canada Geese.

Much smaller than Canada Geese, more like a Cackling.

Shadow of the dark chest, not solid like on an actual Barnacle Goose.

Sibley has a picture.

Cackling Goose**THE SPLIT FROM CANADA GOOSE**

The small subspecies of the old Canada Goose in the high Arctic are now the Cackling Goose, the larger subspecies that breed across Canada and the US are now restricted as Canada Goose. The naming of the split is unfortunate because it leaves Canada Goose, which used to include both of them, as a valid name. Now there is no way to know if “Canada Goose” refers to the old Canada Goose or the new Canada Goose.

A group of small subspecies of the old Canada Goose was sometimes called the Lesser Canada Goose and that included *parvipes* (now in Canada Goose) and *taverneri* (the large form of the Cackling Goose). The split basically threaded the needle right down the middle of Lesser Canada Goose which makes field identification a bit of a problem. *Taverneri* is usually a little darker on the chest and has a somewhat stubbier bill than *parvipes*, but distinguishing them is not easy. Unfortunately the genetics showed them to be not closely related to each other.

FIELD MARKS

Black stocking on the neck. It stops right at the bottom of the neck and does not extend down onto the chest the way it does on a Barnacle Goose or a Brant.

White chin strap.

Sometimes they have a dark line right down the middle of the chin. That can also happen in any of the Canada Geese but it is more common in the Cackling Goose.

Short stubby bill and steeper forehead distinguish from Canada Goose.

The smaller they get the cuter their face looks.

VOCALIZATIONS

Much higher pitched, shriller vocalizations than Canada Goose.

SUBSPECIES

Four different subspecies. Unfortunately the differences are not that obvious for all of the birds, there are a lot of intermediates.

The winter distribution of the different subspecies has not been entirely worked out. It gets very complicated in places like the Willamette Valley in Oregon. That is a contact zone in the wintertime between *taverneri* and *Canada parvipes*. You find a lot of both of them there, if you really want to get into Canada and Cackling geese you should plan a trip up there.

minima

A western population. Sometimes in mixed flocks with Canada Geese but often by themselves. More likely to be seen in the Central Valley and less likely to be seen in parks and gardens and much less likely to be considered a pest like many of the Canada Geese. These birds are migratory and they do go back to their breeding ranges in the high arctic. It appears that a few *minima* do show up in the eastern part of the US.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest subspecies, about the same size as a domestic Mallard.

Dark chest.

Juvenile Aleutian geese sometimes lack the white collar, their chest is usually paler than on *minima*.

Short neck.

Very rounded head.

Tiny, very stubby bill.

ALEUTIAN CACKLING GOOSE *leucopareia*

Population that breeds in the Aleutian Islands and that as an adult always shows a white collar between the black neck and the dark chest. (You can find a white collar on Canada Goose as well as Cackling Goose, but it is an unusual variant.)

OCCURRENCE AND HISTORY

It was formerly an abundant breeding bird on the Aleutian Islands. They declined and became endangered. The blame is usually placed on the Russians who introduced Arctic Foxes onto all of the Aleutian islands. They could breed them and then come back and harvest them in subsequent years at no cost because the foxes eat birds and there are huge colonies of birds including Aleutian Geese on every one of these islands. The foxes eat the eggs and eat the chicks and cause huge amounts of devastation. The foxes were not native to any of those islands. They are native to the mainland where most of these birds do not nest. The birds on the islands evolved without any form of mammalian predators. The introduction of the foxes caused decimation of many seabirds, not just Cackling Geese. As a consequence the Aleutian Cackling Goose was listed by US Fish and Wildlife as an endangered species which was pretty interesting, because the birds used to winter in the Central Valley of CA in along with lots of Canada Geese. There is an open hunting season on Canada Geese and then you got this endangered bird which is occupying the same area. Can you rely on hunters to distinguish between an Aleutian Goose and any other kind of Canada type goose? The consensus was that you could not. They completely closed the areas where the Aleutian Geese were for hunting. The birds move around a little bit. A lot of them winter in the San Joaquin County area. They also trapped out all of the Arctic Foxes on most of those islands and reintroduced the Aleutian Goose. It is now the most common Cackling Goose subspecies in CA as a migrant and a winter visitor. Most common in the Central Valley but can be found along the immediate coast. It has almost completely recovered, it is no longer listed as an endangered species. In Del Norte County, which is one of the major staging areas for it, they have an Aleutian Goose Festival. It is a very well run birdwatching festival.

These birds winter occasionally as far south as San Diego.

FIELD MARKS

Short neck.

Adults white collar coming to a point, not wrapping all the way around the neck, but expanding broadly in the front and contrasting with a dark line underneath it. It is shown in our book as if it wraps all the way around the neck. It does not. It is basically from the side of the neck around the front only. It expands broadly in the front of the neck, a feature not shown correctly in the Nat Geo. This is a difference from other Canada type geese that occasionally show a neck ring.

Some of the first year Aleutian Cackling Geese may lack the neck ring, so some of the birds we're calling *minima* may actually be Aleutian, but Aleutian usually have a paler belly than *minima*.

Steep forehead, domed effect over the tiny little bill.

RICHARDSON'S CACKLING GOOSE *hutchinsii*

A slightly larger Cackling Goose that breeds just north of Hudson Bay. Those birds winter in the eastern US and have not been reliably recorded in CA. It is possible they occur here, with the variation that we are seeing it would be hard to identify them.

Canada Goose

Probably the most abundant and widespread and best known of all the geese in NA.

They are famous for their migration during the daytime, often flying in V formation.

FIELD MARKS

Black stocking on the neck. It stops right at the bottom of the neck and does not extend down onto the chest the way it does on a Barnacle Goose or a Brant.

White chin strap.

Long bill, sloping forehead distinguish it from Cackling Goose. The profile is Canvasback-like, especially in the larger subspecies.

VOCALIZATIONS

Loud honking sound.

SUBSPECIES

Seven subspecies are recognized.

MOFFITT'S CANADA GOOSE *moffitti*

The subspecies which breeds as a native bird in CA. It is a medium large Canada Goose with a white chest. Pretty much restricted as a breeding bird to the Great Basin, at least it used to be.

Canada Goose populations have exploded in CA and elsewhere, largely because of escaped birds that never learned how to migrate. Those birds frequently get fed by people at city parks. Once the birds learn to not be wild that's the end of the story, you end up with hundreds of Canada Geese in your park. The Canada Goose is now a common breeding bird in places like Palo Alto and frequently seen all around the SF Bay Area. In some parks they have become considered a pest because they dare poop on our lawns. These are fairly semi-domestic.

GIANT CANADA GOOSE *maxima*

There was a subspecies nesting on cliffs in the upper Mississippi Valley called the Giant Canada Goose that was severely endangered. They started raising them in captivity. Now they are very popular in captivity and the Giant Canada Goose is all over the place.

Very large.

Appearance similar to *moffitti*.

LESSER CANADA GOOSE *parvipes*

Breeds fairly far to the north. Approaches Cackling *taverneri* in size and appearance.

DUSKY CANADA GOOSE *occidentalis*

Occurs in the Pacific Northwest including Humboldt and Del Norte counties but is very rare south of there and it is not considered to be a migratory bird.

Small.

Dark chested.

Brant

A small sea goose.

Historically two species in NA, the Brant (now subspecies *hrota*) and the Black Brant (now subspecies *nigricans*).

OCCURRENCE

The ones on the west coast are the ones that were formerly called the Black Brant, *nigricans*.

The eastern light bellied *hrota* are rare vagrants to the coast of CA. In the old days when there were Brant and Black Brant people would commonly go and look at the many thousands of Black Brant they could find along the immediate coast and look to see if any of them had light bellies. If they did they would claim that they had seen a Brant and could add it to their lists. The best way to do this is to go in March and April to Humboldt Bay where the total number of Brant that stage in that area is estimated at about 80,000 birds. To this day Joe has not seen an eastern light bellied Brant in CA and he looked at a lot of Brant.

Sibley brings in a third form of Brant, "intermediate". Apparently a unique population that breeds on Melville Island in the northwest territories of Canada and is believed to winter in the Puget Sound region. There has never been a name given to this population, it has never been described to science. These birds are indistinguishable from presumed hybrids between eastern and western Brant, and in fact they may barely be a hybrid zone.

This is a bird that is found almost entirely in salt marshes along the immediate coast, it is not found in the interior. The only place where it is found regularly in the interior is at the Salton Sea, a few birds. The eastern *hrota* may also occur in the Great Lakes region. There used to be large numbers of Brant wintering in CA and they wintered in pretty good numbers in places like Limantour Estero and Bodega Bay and all up and down along the coast. San Diego Bay had large numbers. That stopped about 1975-1980, the birds just weren't wintering here any more. There was concern about the population collapsing. It seems that the population is still quite healthy although we lost a lot of our wintering birds. They all winter in Mexico. Much of their fall migration seems to be offshore, we do not see them in any kind of numbers then. In the spring

they migrate more along the coast and they move into estuaries and start to stage. In Bodega Bay you find lots of Brant in March and April. The trouble is they are usually out in the middle of the bay.

They used to hunt the bird in CA. A lot of those old floating blinds out in Tomales Bay were for hunting Brant in the old days and they have pretty much been abandoned and now Ospreys nest on them.

Occasionally they winter in places like Princeton harbor. And occasionally they summer. Probably first year birds or birds that are sick or injured may not migrate and may spend the entire summer at a place like Año Nuevo. They can get heavily worn and bleached by the summertime, the colors on summering birds are completely unreliable, they are not light bellied birds just because they are so pale.

FIELD MARKS

Black head, black neck.

The black comes all the way down onto the chest.

White collar comes around the front of the neck and connects in *nigricans*, restricted to little patches at the sides of the neck in *hrota*.

A lot of white on the flanks

Middle of the belly black in *nigricans*, light in *hrota*. You cannot see that difference in swimming birds.

Tail dark, but the uppertail coverts are very long so you have more white in the tail than on a Canada or a Greater White-fronted Goose, a lot of white at the rear end of the birds.

Very compact in flight. Lots of white on the undertail coverts and on the tail